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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that parents may influence the sexual attitudes and behaviors of their late adolescent children. Family sexual communication and the quality of general family communication are two variables that seem to be related to aspects of adolescent sexuality. To examine this issue, college students (N=95) and their parents were administered the Attitudes Toward Sexuality Scale, the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale, and questions about sexual activity and contraceptive use. Parent-child communication about sex was measured by having subjects indicate the extent to which nine sexual topics had been discussed in the family. Findings showed that for female subjects, there was a relationship between parent-child communication about sex and similarity in sexual attitudes of mothers and daughters. For males in the high communication groups, there was a similarity between their attitudes and those of both their mothers and their fathers. The quality of family communication in general was not significantly related to parent-child communication about sex. The results support the view that parents of late adolescents are still capable of exerting influence over their children in the area of sexuality. Whether this influence comes from direct communication about sexuality, or from the quality of the parent-child relationship in general seems to depend on whether similarity in sexual attitudes or sexual behavior is being measured. (NB)

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Family Relationships and Parent-child Discussion about Sex

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Family Relationships and Parent-child Discussion about Sex

Research on various aspects of adolescent sexuality has indicated that parents may influence the sexual attitudes and possibly the sexual behavior of their late adolescent children more than they might imagine. Generally, family sexual communication and the quality of general family communication are two of the major variables that seem to be related to aspects of adolescent sexuality.

Although relatively few parents are actually the primary sex educators of their children (Fox, 1981), the results of some studies have indicated that when parents do talk to their children about sex, the adolescents tend to be less likely to engage in premarital sex (Brody, Ottey, & Lagrandade, 1976; Goldfarb et al., 1977; Lewis, 1973; Spanier, 1977). Many researchers have found that if these parent-educated teens do engage in premarital sex, they are more likely to use an effective, consistent means of birth control and to have fewer sexual partners (Fox, 1981; Furstenberg, 1971; Lewis, 1973; Shah & Zelnik, 1981; Spanier, 1977). On the other hand, Newcomer and Udry (1985) have recently reported that, at least among their sample of junior high school students, the influence of parent-child communication about sex is limited and depends on whether parents or children are doing the reporting. Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg (1986) have also reported a failure to find much empirical support for the assertion that parent-child communication is related to lower rates of premarital sexual activity among their 15- and 16-year-old subjects.

While the relationship between parent-child communication about sex and subsequent sexual behavior is equivocal at present, family sexual communication is clearly related to similarity in sexual attitudes between parents and their children, at least among college students. Fisher (1986a) found (and later replicated) that in those families where there was a high level of communication about sex between parent and child, parents and their late adolescent offspring

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had sexual attitudes that were highly correlated, whereas the correlation was not significant among the low communication families. In this previous study, however, only one parent from each family was used in the analysis. It is necessary to establish this relationship between sexual discussions and attitude similarity with both parents.

Family Relationships

Family relationships seem to be a relevant variable in the exploration of parent-child communication about sex. In her review of the variables that are related to parental communication about sex, Fox (1981) pointed out that very few variables have been found to be related to or predict which parents discuss sex with their children and which do not. The quality of general parent-child communication is a variable that would seem quite pertinent but has not been much used in this type of research in the past. It is important to determine whether family communication about sex is simply a function of a more general type of communication or whether it is an independent entity. In other words, will the families with a high level of sexual communication also be significantly higher in terms of the quality of their general communication? If so, then sexual communication becomes less important as a predictive or explanatory factor and becomes simply a component of the more general variable of family communication. No researcher to date has examined the actual relationship between parent-child communication about sex and the openness of general communication within the family, although a few studies have examined the issue of family relationships and their influence on sexual/contraceptive behavior, leading to the general conclusion that premarital sexual activity is less likely and contraceptive use is more likely when the family relations are good (Darling & Hicks, 1982; Fox, 1981; Jessor & Jessor, 1975; Jorgensen, King, & Torrey, 1980; Lewis, 1973).

It was the purpose of the following study to further examine the relationship between the sexual attitudes of parents and their adolescent offspring as a function of family communication about sex, using parents of both sexes. The relationship between family communication ~~about sex~~ in general and parent-child communication about sex in particular was examined as well as the relationship between family communication and sexual activity and contraceptive use of the adolescents.

Method

Subjects

Ninety-five unmarried General Psychology students between the ages of 18 and 23 attending a regional campus of a large midwestern university participated in the study along with both of their parents. The students were given extra credit or experimental credit for their participation. The sample consisted primarily of a mixture of working class and middle class white, Protestant families.

Instruments

Sexual attitudes of the parents and students were measured by means of the Attitudes Toward Sexuality Scale (Fisher & Hall, 1986). Parent-child communication was measured using Barnes & Olson's Parent-Adolescent Communication scale which measures open family communication and problems in family communication (Olson et al., 1982). Parent-child communication about sex was measured by asking subjects to indicate the extent to which nine specific sexual topics had been discussed (pregnancy, fertilization, intercourse, menstruation, venereal disease, birth control, abortion, prostitution, and homosexuality). Several questions about sexual activity and contraceptive use were also asked.

Procedure

Students and their parents completed the questionnaires at home and returned them anonymously. The students', mothers', and fathers' questionnaires were matched by means of a six-digit code number generated by the student. Seventy-two percent of those students who initially took questionnaires returned a set of three completed forms.

Results

Because the sexual communication scores for females were much higher than those for males, separate medians were used in order to divide the group into high sexual communication and low sexual communication families by means of a median split.

The familial resemblance in sexual attitudes as a function of parent-child communication about sex was found in three of the four analyses based on the reports of the students about sexual communication within the family, but in none of the analyses based on the parents' reports. Table 1 shows the correlations between students' and parents' sexual attitudes classified by sexual communication level based on the students' reports. For the female subjects, there was a relationship between parent-child communication about sex and similarity in sexual attitudes of mothers and daughters, with a higher correlation in the families where the daughters reported a high level of sexual communication with their mothers. For males in the high communication groups, there was a similarity between their attitudes and those of both their mothers and their fathers.

The correlation between sexual communication and general family communication was obtained to help determine how closely related these two measures were. A composite score was created for both sexual discussion and family communication by adding together the students' and parents' reports in each family. The correlation between these two measures was not significant for

the mothers, r (93) = .20, $p > .05$ or the fathers, r (92) = .20, $p > .05$. Using the composite score for family communication, t-tests were used to compare the level of general family communication in the low and high sexual communication groups, based on both parents' and students' reports, but there were no significant differences.

Parent-adolescent communication based on the parents' reports seemed to be related to sexual experience for both males and females. For male subjects, whether or not they had had sexual intercourse was correlated with their general communication with both their fathers, r (32) = .39, $p < .05$ and their mothers, r (32) = .45, $p < .05$, such that those whose parents reported better communication were less likely to have had sexual intercourse. On the other hand, the amount that the male subjects reported that their father discussed sex with them was related to greater likelihood of sexual activity, r (32) = -.38, $p < .05$. For females, this measure of sexual activity was only significantly correlated with general communication with their mothers (based on the mothers' reports), r (59) = .29, $p < .05$.

Among the males, the age at first coitus was highly correlated with the quality of general communication with both their fathers (fathers' reports), r (16) = .60, $p < .01$, and their mothers (mothers' reports), r (16) = .58, $p < .01$. These variables were not correlated significantly among the female students, and they were not correlated with parent-child communication about sex for either gender.

Parent-child communication about sex and general family communication was not significantly correlated with the number of sexual partners for either males or females.

For female subjects only, the percentage of time that contraception was used was significantly related to the amount of communication about sex with their mothers that they reported, r (35) = .48, $p < .01$, but not to their mothers'

reports of sexual communication or to their general communication with their mothers. Contraceptive use for male subjects did not seem to be related to any of the communication variables.

Discussion

The most interesting finding of this study is that the quality of family communication in general was not related to parent-child communication about sex. Indeed, the low and high sexual communication families did not differ significantly on this variable, and the two variables of general family communication and parent-child sexual discussions were not significantly correlated. This means that there are many families with close and open communication within which sex is not often discussed, and there are other families with a relatively poor quality of communication within which aspects of sexuality seem to be discussed quite often. This finding fails to support the popular impression that family-based sex education is most likely to be found where there is a good parent-child relationship, and points out the paradox that even in a close, open relationship, sex is often terribly difficult for people to talk about, particularly in a non-sexual relationship such as that between parent and child. This finding also indicates that the study of general parent-child relationships is a worthy endeavor that might yield significant information about adolescent sexuality beyond that of a simple study of parent-child communication about sex.

Even though it is family discussion about sex that in the past has been found to be related to sexual activity and contraceptive use, in this study, it was the parents' reports about the quality of general communication which they had with their children which were most related to sexual activity, particularly for males. Possibly the reason that, in this study, sexual behavior appeared to be more closely related to general communication than to communication about sex

was because the measure of sexual communication used here was quite objective, whereas the measures used by most previous researchers have been much more subjective, perhaps reflecting more on the quality of the relationship than on actual discussion about sex. However, contraceptive use for females still seemed to be more closely related to the extent of discussion with parents about sexuality rather than the general relationship between the parents and their daughter.

Until now, there has never been a large distinction made between family sexual discussions and family communication in general. Due to the findings of this study, it is hoped that in the future, the influences of these two variables will be studied independently. Parent-child communication might be a stronger predictor of adolescent sexual behavior than sexual discussions between parents and their children. At the very least, it is apparent that both measures of communication should be included in research examining family influences on sexuality.

The results of this study support the view that parents of late adolescents are still capable of exerting influence over their children, at least in the area of sexuality. Although this was a correlational study, limiting conclusions as to causality, a recent study by Chewning et al. (1986) demonstrated that patterns of communication are established before the differences in sexual behavior as a function of family communication about sex appear. Whether this apparent influence comes from direct communication about sexuality, or from the quality of the parent-child relationship in general seems to depend on whether similarity in sexual attitudes or sexual behavior is being measured.

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Table 1

Correlation between Parents' and Adolescents' Sexual Attitudes as a Function of Sexual Communication

Mothers		Fathers	
Low Communication	High Communication	Low Communication	High Communication
Entire Group			
.12 (50)	.52** (45)	.05 (51)	.24 (44)
Males			
.32 (19)	.60* (15)	.20 (17)	.54* (17)
Females			
-.07 (31)	.49** (30)	-.06 (34)	.10 (27)

Note. The number of subjects in each group appear in parentheses.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$